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ABSTRACT

A study of the non-punitive grading system at Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC) was undertaken to assess the impact on student performance of X (assigned in lieu of F), W (withdrawal), and I (incomplete) grades, and other institutions' perceptions and use of these grades in considering KVCC transfer students for admission. KVCC Student Senate members (10), faculty coordinators of the eleven Career Development Centers, admissions officers from six four-year colleges and universities that regularly accept 90% of KVCC transfer students, and personnel managers from four firms who regularly hire KVCC graduates were interviewed. In addition, secondary data, gathered from computerized grade reports, were reviewed to determine the actual distribution of grades awarded from fall 1974 through fall 1976. All groups shared a lack of understanding of the grading system. Controversy centered around the X and to a lesser extent the W grades. Most students and faculty, and five of the transfer institutions viewed the X grade as a failure, and thereby punitive. Based on study findings, the KVCC grading system was changed in fall 1977; 0.0 was instituted in place of X. In the two semesters since adoption, 0.0 grades accounted for 4.5% less of overall distribution than had X grades. It is believed that 0.0 grades will aid in identifying students with academic problems. (TR)

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"Non-Punitive" Grading Systems: The Experience of One College

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Methods for evaluation of student progress and performance continue to be a subject to debate. Among community colleges, there are many variations in grading systems and other evaluative mechanisms. This phenomenon may in part be attributable to the role of community colleges in the education of chronically low academic achievers -- people with a history of low grades. How do community colleges encourage these students to remain in school, yet maintain an evaluation system which accurately reflects the wide range of student abilities? Paul Dressel (1976) examines many of the issues related to student evaluation and grading. Those of particular interest in this study are: Should we condemn grades because of the anxiety they may produce? Should failures be included in a grade point average? How consistently are grading standards applied by faculty members? Do faculty and students understand the grading system being used by their institution? The reader is referred to Dressel's chapter "Grades, Credits, and Alternatives" for a broad discussion of these and related questions (1976).

Dorothy Knoell (1976) reports an increase in community college grading reforms "which have resulted in a reduction in the number of penalty grades awarded (F and WF)". While Dr. Knoell believes there should be more, not fewer, options for enrollment type (credit/no-credit, variable entry and exit, etc.), she also emphasizes a need for community college agreement on guidelines for the content of student records and the use of symbols for nonpenalty grades. Finally, she indicates "colleges should develop techniques for identifying and providing help to students whose record of non-achievement extends over several semesters, but who are escaping notice in the absence of penalty grades" (1976).

The grading system in use at Kalamazoo Valley Community College was subject to all the concerns noted above. The system was believed to be "non-punitive" in that failures were not explicitly termed failures, and were not computed in grade point averages (GPA). An X grade was to be awarded when student performance fell below a D, or 1.0. Although X grades were not computed in GPA's, they were recorded on permanent grade transcripts. If a student reenrolled in a course for which she/he had received an X grade, the X would remain, in addition to any subsequent grade.

The Instructional Affairs Council at Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC) engaged in a discussion of the grading system, and concluded that problems of sufficient magnitude existed to support a research request. This request read in part:

> It is appropriate at this time to conduct an assessment of the impact of KVCC's use of X, W, and I grades upon student performance while at KVCC and other institution's perceptions and utilization of those three grades in considering transfer students for admission. The Council was interested in knowing whether our non-punitive system was deluding students into a relatively unconcerned approach to completing courses, while other schools and perhaps employers were assigning their own negative connotations to such grades when reviewing transcripts.

This request was endorsed by the Dean of Instruction, and the research office was asked to investigate the perceptions and practices of several groups which are affected in some manner by the grading system: students, faculty, potential employers of KVCC students, and institutions which regularly accept transfer students from KVCC.

Study Procedures

Several data collection techniques and target populations were included in this study. The nature of the study was primarily descriptive. Instructional staff wanted to know "what is really happening with X grades, incompletes, and withdrawals?"

Current Students

A group interview was conducted during a meeting of the KVCC Student Senate. Included in this group of 10 students were first and second year students, equal numbers of males and females, and students from a wide variety of curricula. The Student Senate had requested involvement in the study, and members had reviewed a list of questions prior to the meeting. These questions formed the basis for the group interview.

Faculty

KVCC faculty are organized into Career Development Centers (CDC), each of which is coordinated by a faculty member. Each of the 11 CDC Coordinators was interviewed, using a structured interview schedule. The interviews were of approximately 20 minutes duration.

Because the CDC Coordinators hold regular meetings with faculty in their Center, and represent all discipline areas of the College, their responses were expected to generally reflect faculty perceptions and practices.

Transfer Institutions

Six four-year colleges and universities regularly accept over 90% of the transfer students from KVCC. These institutions were contacted, and telephone interviews were conducted with the admissions officers primarily responsible for transfer students from community colleges.

Potential Employers

The Placement Office provided a list of four employers who regularly hire KVCC graduates. These employers represented large industry, small industry, public service agencies, and public employers. A telephone interview was conducted with the personnel manager for each place of employment.

Secondary Data

Secondary data, gathered from computerized grade reports, was reviewed in order to determine the actual distribution of grades awarded at the College,

and any trends in that distribution. These data consisted of grades awarded from the Fall semester of 1974 through the Fall semester of 1976.

Four Michigan community colleges with enrollments comparable to KVCC were contacted informally, and the research officers were asked to provide data regarding the grade distribution at their institutions, for comparison purposes.

Results

Findings are summarized below for each data source used in the study.

Students

The students who participated in the group interview were not fully aware of the grading system policies and procedures. Several students believed an X grade was removed from their records if a course was retaken and successfully completed. All the students reported they believe the X grade is simply another term for failure.

The opinion was expressed that the letter "X" is a stigma in itself, and may be more harmful than a 0.0 because it "looks bad", but is not used by other colleges.

The group interview participants suggested a fuller explanation of the grading system would be helpful, and should include the procedures for course withdrawal, the differences between an incomplete and an X grade, and the College guidelines for awarding incompletes.

Faculty

Variations in both grading practices and perceptions of the purpose of X, I, and W grades were frequent among the faculty interviewed. Two areas of misconception were grade recording practices and faculty ability to initiate a student's withdrawal for a course.

Faculty were not sure what "happens" to an incomplete if the course is not later completed, and to an X grade if the course is retaken and success-

fully completed. Four of the eleven faculty were not certain about faculty initiation of student withdrawal from a course.

The interviewees viewed X grades as failures, but reported the preponderance of X grades were awarded to "no shows" -- students who had enrolled in their course, but never attended class or stopped attending without a formal withdrawal. One faculty member regularly assigned 1.0 grades to failing students, a reaction to his belief that low performance should be reflected in the GPA.

The procedures for assignment of an incomplete were reported as uniformly followed. The College did have a written policy for the assignment of incompletes, and faculty were aware of this policy.

Eight of the eleven faculty interviewed indicated KVCC should have a failing grade, such as 0.0. Of these eight, one faculty member indicated a failure should not affect grade point averages, and another suggested that in the event a course is retaken and passed, the failure should be removed from the transcript.

Transfer Institutions

The six transfer institutions included in the telephone survey varied widely in their view and use of X, I, and W grades. All of the institutions had some form of grade point average entry requirement, ranging from a required 3.0 GPA to the probationary acceptance of students with a GPA under 2.0.

Five of the six transfer institutions reported KVCC transfer student GPA's are recomputed, with the X grades computed as 0.0 grades. Two of these institutions reported that only those courses related to the student's major are examined, while one institution entirely recomputed KVCC student GPA's: only transferable courses, however, were utilized in determining whether or not a student has the grade point average required for entrance.

The sixth institution, which relies more on honor points than GPA for admittance requirements, reported that all letter grades from KVCC are ignored.

Two institutions reported some confusion over KVCC's grading system, and requested a more complete explanation of the use and purpose of letter grades.

In addition to admittance requirements, three institutions noted that their recomputation of GPA could affect a student's eligibility for academic scholarships.

Potential Employers

Of the four employers contacted, only one reported that grade transcripts are required for job applications. The personnel manager for this company reported they are primarily interested in student performance in courses applicable to the job. He also reported a dislike of I and X grades, and suggested KVCC should assign an F grade when appropriate. Grades like I, W, and X are used to determine attendance patterns, and general "stick-to-it-iveness".

Secondary Data

Of the 58,522 grades included in this analysis, 18% (10,549) were X grades. This percentage varied less than 1% during the semesters analyzed. Passing grades (4.0 through 1.0) accounted for 69.5% of the total grades awarded. Table 1 depicts the proportion of each grade type awarded for five semesters.

The proportion of passing grades awarded at KVCC was less than the proportion awarded at the other four Michigan community colleges. For those colleges, passing grades constituted between 75% and 80% of the total grades awarded. Withdrawals at the other colleges averaged about 5% higher than withdrawals at KVCC. Failing grades constituted, on the average, 10% less than X grades did at KVCC.

Table 1

All Grades Awarded
Fall Semester, 1974, through Fall Semester, 1976

Grade	Number	Percent
4.0	15,849	27.1
3.5	7,669	13.1
3.0	7,614	13.0
2.5	3,935	6.7
2.0	3,591	6.1
1.5	968	1.6
1.0	1,025	1.7
Total Passing Grades	40,651	69.5
X	10,549	18.0
Incomplete	2,034	3.5
Withdrawal	4,992	8.5
Audit	296	0.5
TOTAL	58,522	99.8

Conclusions

A finding common to each target group in this investigation was the lack of understanding and variable application of KVCC's grading system. Controversy centered around the X grade, and to a lesser extent, the W grade. Incompletes were understood quite well by all the groups.

Most students and faculty reported the X grade was viewed as a failure, as did five transfer institutions. To the extent that this is true, the College grading system was not "non-punitive". When faculty, students, and transcript evaluators interpret X grades as failures, the system is punitive.

This study exemplifies the investigative work often carried out by institutional research offices in community colleges. Faculty were concerned that the grading system was not well understood, and might have the illusion of being nonpunitive, while in fact it could be very punitive if students were being "deluded into a false sense of security". Faculty concern was found to be justified, and subsequent steps were taken by administrators to correct the problem.

Based on the findings of this study, the grading system at KVCC was changed. The X grade is no longer used, and a 0.0 was instituted in the Fall semester of 1977. The College catalogue was reviewed to reflect the new grading plicy, and the description of the grading system was expanded.

Only two semesters have passed since the change from X to 0.0 grades. For these two semesters, 0.0 grades accounted for 4.5% less of the overall grade distribution than had X grades in the two previous semesters. The trend is for a continuing decrease in 0.0 grades. Table 2, summarizes this change.

Table 2

Overall Grade Distributions
for
the Two Semesters Preceeding and Following the X to 0.0 Change

Grade	Fall 1976 (N=17,238)	Spring 1977 (N=16,218)	Fall 1977 (N=15,483)	Spring 1978 (N=15,011)
Passing (4.0 to 1.0)	68.1%	66.6%	69.3%	70.9%
X or 0.0	17.7%	18.6%	14.3%	13.2%
Incomplete	3.1%	3.9%	4.0%	3.3%
Withdrawal	10.3%	9.8%	10.9%	10.9%
Audit	0.9%	1.1%	1.5%	1.8%
TOTALS	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.1%

More students are completing their classes, or are formally withdrawing from a class, rather than fail. The College will be better able to identify those students who are having real academic difficulties, and attempt to provide counseling or tutoring services for their assistance. This data will continue to be collected and analyzed, to see if the trend toward fewer failing grades continues.

The philosophical question posed at the beginning of this paper remains, however: Are not low academic achievers penalized enough by their history of failure, and continuing learning frustration, without our adding to their poor self-concept, their record of low achievement? At Kalamazoo Valley Community College, the decision was made to at least be able to separate these students from those who don't bother to formally withdraw, or those who opted for an X rather than lower their grade point average with a 1.0 or even 2.0 grade. While we remain unsure of the effect of failing grades on chronic low academic

achievers, we were convinced that any advantages of our "non-punitive" grade were over come by the disadvantages.

The need for further research in this area is intense and immediate. The questions posed by Dressel remain unanswered. If the arguments commonly given for non-punitive grading systems are legitimate, educators must activily campaign for their acceptance. If they are not legitimate, we must acknowledge that student interests are not being served by non-penalty grades and change our practices accordingly.

References:

Dressel, Paul. Handbook of Academic Evaluation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.

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